

United States – Venezuela Comparative:
Youth Involvement in Sustainable Agriculture

Andrea Wiley

Agro-Ecological Sustainability and Social Movements of Venezuela
Susan Rose & Jennifer Halpin
February 22, 2009

Small-scale farms are nearing extinction. That is, unless farmers can reinstate a sustainable agricultural food system. Since the early 20th century, industrialization and urbanization have caused families and individuals alike to shift from farming as a mainstream profession to manufacturing and service oriented jobs. Such rural to urban migration has reduced both the population in rural regions and the quantity of farms producing agricultural goods. As a result, people from around the globe – both in developed and third world nations – have diverged from locally based, diversified agricultural food systems and embraced large-scale corporate food production. The latter, although often more affordable, harms the environment through mass-scale technology and forms a homogeneous food base for society. Nutritious, good quality local food has become a rare commodity. Now, as a method of securing staple food sources, creating jobs and improving the quality of the environment, we must explore the possibility of reverting back to the fields.

The United States and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela are two nations that have made valiant efforts to promote a sustainable agricultural agenda; that is, a process that meets the needs of the present without jeopardizing natural resources or the needs of the future (Sustainability handout). Although these two nations generally face vastly different social, economic and political issues, they share the same need for sustainable agricultural solutions. In order to re-orient the societal focus in this direction, governmental agencies and grass-roots organizations in both countries have implemented educational programs in agriculture with the goal of targeting American and Venezuelan youth. The thought is that with agricultural programs in place, the youth that are exposed to such opportunities will develop an interest in sustainable movements.

Starting in the 1920s, America's emphasis on agriculture decreased. Urbanization post World War I led to a focus on factory work and at the same time heightened prominence of higher education which helped matriculate more children into local school systems. Due to lack of interest and decreased population in rural regions, small scale farms began to decline. Farming also lessened as an integral part of family life and became viewed as a separate profession and not a responsibility of the nuclear family. Since then, it has been a struggle to make this once family oriented work a desirable career-path.

Government-backed programs along with grass-roots organizations in the United States have worked to increase interest in agriculture by establishing hands-on programs in education and business for youth. Such programs have proven themselves necessary. The average age of a U.S. farmer today is nearing 60, up from 50 in 1978. "Just 5 percent of farmers in 2002 were between the ages of 25 and 34" (Schweitzer). Without new interest in the field, the profession could vanish along with small-scale farms.

According to the article entitled *Going back to the land: Young people moving in to fill environmental niches*, "The aging of the American farmer...is due to global trends that have made middle-sized farms, the sort operated by families throughout much of the 20th century, unprofitable compared to bigger, more efficient operations" (Schwietzer) Such 'global trends' include mass-production and over-seas product distribution. In response to this tendency, the United States Department of Agriculture, USDA, is working to enhance rural and community development by engaging in a variety of programs that support small-scale farmers. Their mission is to "provide leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, and related issues based on sound public policy, the

best available science, and efficient management” (USDA). Government establishments provide assistance at the infrastructure level including programs for rural state offices to provide financial assistance, rural energy loans and grants, and outreach programs for farmers that assist socially disadvantaged farmers with limited resources. They claim that “The well-being of rural and small town America depends on the availability of good-paying jobs, access to critical services, strong communities, and a healthy natural environment” (USDA). This model demonstrates the support needed around the country for farmers to improve their quality of life and be recognized as a key provider of health in society.

Measuring the total impact of government initiatives presented by the USDA is difficult to track. Their programs related to sustainability are limited; however they have recognized the need to bring younger generations into agriculture and have begun to fund programs to proliferate youth involvement.

An example of a government-backed program for youth in schools is *Agriculture in the Classroom*, whose goal is “to help students gain a greater awareness of the role of agriculture in the economy and society as a whole so that they may become citizens who support wise agricultural policies” (AITC). By bringing awareness to younger generations to promote an understanding of agriculture, they also inspire youth to enter the agricultural sector professionally. AITC holds a variety of workshops and state programs each year for public and private school teachers, curriculum coordinators, school counselors, pre-service teachers and other officials, reaching a total of 7,741 participants just in the Pennsylvania workshops. These environmentally conscience professionals from schools across the U.S. carry with them their knowledge to the

classroom for they have “recognized the interlocking role of farming and food and fiber production with environmental quality, including wildlife habitat, clean water, and the preservation and improvement of forests” (AITC). Through emphasis on small-scale agricultural production as a cornerstone of the nation’s economy, they pass on the awareness of the subject hoping to generate greater interest among kids in schools for America to develop a more sustainable future.

In addition to education and training-based programs, the USDA website includes a link for kids with activities on the subject of farming. One section asks children to submit a drawing based on the prompt: “If I had my own farm.” Although a dubious exercise, trying to inspire the youngest group of children possible holds potential of attracting them to farming early-on; which could ultimately lead to interest in farming as a profession. Prompts for this activity include questions such as “If you had your own farm, what kinds of food would you grow? What kinds of animals would you raise? Would you have a barn? Would you run a fruit stand?” (FSA) Each question refers to different characteristics of farming to educate children about the different aspects of sustainable agriculture. The website also includes games, puzzles, and fun facts about farming, as well as worksheets for school teachers. By using technology as a medium of speaking to the youngest generation, the United States Department of Agriculture demonstrates their understanding of the need to reach an important demographic in a modern fashion.

Discussion of youth in farming goes beyond the kindergarten and younger aged group listed above. The term ‘youth’ also pertains to teenagers and university students, and even slightly beyond. Outreach to these groups does not only originate from the

government, but mainly from smaller non-profit or privately funded organizations. These groups also focus on educating youth about farming to prepare students or participants for careers in agriculture.

A recent addition to the non-profit sector has been through *Growingpower.org*, a non-profit training center. Started by a businessman who missed the farm of his childhood, his goals for the program were to grow food, grow minds, and to grow community. Through his program, sustainable agriculture is practiced and preached through involvement at their rural farm sites with their youth corps:

To grow sustainably means that we do not use any synthetic chemicals – fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides – on any of our crops. We prefer to do things the old fashioned way; we hand pick weeds, we control pests with beneficial insects such as ladybugs, and we use foliar compost tea to help control pest and bacteria problems. (Growing Power, Inc)

By maintaining sustainable practices, this organization is able to teach the importance of agriculture as a holistic process. They foster programs for youth through after school and job training programs and teach college students on-site at their farms in Milwaukee and Chicago. The program has been extremely successful. In 2005, the program was honored through the Leadership for a Changing World Award from the Ford Foundation, thus demonstrating their dedication to teaching sustainable agricultural practices to youth.

Leadership is indeed an important theme when developing an agenda for the future of agriculture. One opportunity for youth with this emphasis is a “4-H” after-school program based on citizenship that works to connect youth with their community leaders in order for them to become engaged, responsible citizens. “It’s clear that civic engagement provides the foundation that helps youth understand the big picture of life and learn the skill sets that will allow them to become wise leaders for the 21st century.”

This participatory engagement is consistent with the citizenship program's sub-agenda called *Engaging Youth, Serving Communities*. As it is mainly based in rural areas, this initiative encourages youth to become involved with local issues and to address community needs; one of which is sustainable agricultural development, thus introducing farming to youth as an opportunity to engage in their community and perhaps develop long-term interest in agriculture (4-H).

Similar to the 4-H programs that stress leadership skills, other programs for youth have also adapted ideals relating to entrepreneurial expertise. It must be recognized that in order to become a farmer at the local or small-scale tier, one must acquire and develop a variety of skills beyond the physical aspect of working in the field. "Because [smaller enterprises] often operate without middlemen or employees, the farmers must oversee production, marketing, sales, and distribution" (Schweitzer). Not only do they require extreme preparation, they must also exhibit perseverance and the drive to succeed. This profession is not only physically demanding and time consuming, but also challenging and rewarding to those who partake in it.

Following such a model, the National Future Farmers of America Program is a privately funded organization that started in 1928 to educate students about the various aspects of the agricultural profession. They provide students and educators with resources about agricultural development to "prepare students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber and natural resources systems." They have over 500,000 participants in 7,358 chapters in all 50 states, with only 30% of the students coming from rural communities. The FFA helps participants "develop interpersonal skills in teamwork, communications, human relations and social

interaction” while working to “promote cooperation and cooperative attitudes among all people”. Their well-integrated curriculum promotes “premier leadership, personal growth and career success,” all of which are crucial components to success for youth whom are looking to pursue careers in agriculture. (FFA)

Encouraging participation in all of these programs requires recruitment of youth, a crucial generation for the farming industry. Periodicals for young professionals, such as the *Newsletter of the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service*, provide information about programs available to new farmers. There are a plethora of existing services in the United States for young people that are just starting out in sustainable agriculture. For example, “*The National Farm Transition Network* fosters next generation farmers and ranchers by introducing them to experienced producers who are ready to retire.” The reality is that older farmers are willing to take any necessary measure to make sure that their profession continues. This newsletter also cites resources such as the *Carolina Farm Stewardship Association* that provides “farm incubators” which are educational farms that lease a parcel of land to new growers along with rental equipment and “advanced knowledge without having to buy it.” Such business planning assistance eases the process for new farmers entering the industry. (ATTRA)

Giving power and support to new people entering the field of agriculture has been a clever tactic of the government, non-profit organizations, and the educational sector in the United States. With this approach, agricultural programs are also emerging in Universities throughout the country. For example, an undergraduate and graduate program at the University of Vermont that trains students in all aspects of sustainable agricultural business has yielded great success. One enthusiastic student noted: "There is

this sense that we don't have to do investment banking or IT and work in a cubicle all day. We can live a more hands-on life" (Schweitzer). These college students understand the social differences from the time period of family farms, and the dangers small-scale farms face today since the emergence of large-scale agribusinesses. They that have been inspired by the efforts of the United States: "You hear about all these terrible things in the world, and you're told to go out there and change them," said Ian Irwin, 22, who plans to raise cattle after graduating from the University of Vermont. "This is an enjoyable way to do our part." These students are planning on making a difference for the future of farming (Schweitzer).

Still, agricultural programs face the challenge of securing and increasing youth involvement. The U.S. holds social and historical ties to materialism, extravagance, and self-indulgence, generally endorsing individualism and personal capitalistic gain before communal success and the need for sustainable agriculture ("What are American Ideals and Weaknesses?"). Thus, all agricultural programs in the United States cannot be guaranteed long term success provided that these moral values continue to hinder development. Regardless of the tremendous efforts of the various programs noted above, younger generations, from rural, suburban, and urban areas, lack awareness and appreciation for sustainable agriculture in the U.S. therefore dispiriting the development of youth programs in the United States. Nevertheless, the few that do get involved will continue to salvage small-scale farming for the rest of us. Accordingly, one agricultural entrepreneur said: "some of the young farmers and farmers-to-be say they are motivated by a sense that farming can save the world or at least some corner of it" (Schweitzer).

While the United States has made strides towards promoting youth involvement in agriculture, so has the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. However, while one might think that the United States as a first world nation that endorses capitalism and individualistic growth before communal success would have a harder time promoting long-term sustainable agriculture among their youth, in fact this third world nation that endorses communal participation faces many of the same difficulties as the U.S. when reaching out to their youth. There is a general lack of interest in farming. Venezuelan youth that have become greatly involved in the Bolivarian revolution and back President Hugo Chavez's new initiatives for increased healthcare, education, and democracy don't always show this same support for agrarian reform:

The fact that young people are incorporated in the communal councils and so on shows that something is happening and the consciousness is starting to increase, but there's also a long way to go. The large majority of youth are still thinking about earning money and living a life of luxury (Pearson).

American ideals have spread to Latin America through mass-media and other mediums. While the standard of living associated with prosperity is indeed appealing, and no one can deny these youth of their dreams, we must now rely on increased consciousness about the need for sustainable agriculture and strong programs that inspire youth involvement in order for Venezuelan programs to prevail.

Since the election of left-wing President Hugo Chavez, agricultural development has become a priority for the government. Beginning with Misión Zamora, Venezuela implemented a national program to "support sustainable agricultural development based on a philosophy of a just distribution of land in accordance with values of equality and social justice." (Land Reform in Venezuela) Tackling issues of desperate poverty and polarized inequality the Venezuelan government employed youth programs related to

agriculture in hopes of creating food stability in the rural sector. “While Venezuela is one of the world’s largest oil exporters, it imports about 70 percent of its food even though it has plenty of rich agricultural land” (Land Reform in Venezuela). Venezuela is the only country in all of Latin America that is a net importer of agricultural products, rather than a net exporter. This is an extremely unstable method of food production and it is not sustainable in the long-run. (Land Reform in Venezuela)

In the hopes of securing a more staple food source, the Venezuelan government launched a program in 2003 entitled “Vuelta al Campo” (Return to the countryside). This began in the state of Lara where 23 families came together to form a cooperative with a commitment to food sovereignty in anticipation of doubling the country’s food production within just a few years. This program points out the central goal of agrarian reform: community based agriculture which brings the youngest population of the country to the fields to foster the upmost production possible. This is also a program that follows one of the goals of Venezuela’s new constitution:

The constitution talks about how Venezuela’s socioeconomic regime ought to be strongly based around cooperative and associative work and that this will help break free of individualism and neoliberalism, which gives the program socialist content. To coopertativize is to socialize the economy, give it social content. (Chavez)

The premise of communal participation is strong. It brings hope that by returning to the land, the nation’s youth will adapt idealism of growth and stability that is often associated with communal success.

As a policy of development during the Chavez administration, cooperative movements “have been opened by a great number of local governments, public institutions, and enterprises, including Venezuela’s oil company, PDVSA” (Harnecker).

The government initiated program *Misión Vuelven Caras*, for example, provides an educational opportunity for university students to form their own cooperatives. As of 2005, 70% of the students had started their own cooperatives, resulting in 7,592 new cooperatives, 73.5% of which were in agriculture thus contributing to the reduction of the national dependency on foreign food imports. Although we do not yet know the long-term impacts of the cooperatives in their individual communities it can be noted that they have increased formal employment and economic output- from a source other than oil. Critics validly argue that the Venezuelan government has made it too easy to create a cooperative, but these critics are also too extreme in their predictions that most new cooperatives are doomed to failure. *Misión Vuelven Caras* provides a clear opportunity for youth (the university students) to lead movements in the realm of sustainable agriculture. Although we hope that they succeed, increased interest in agriculture from this mission has already been triumphant. (Harnecker)

Beyond these national government initiated programs, there are a plethora of programs in Venezuela at the grass roots level aspiring to heighten youth participation in farming. During a recent trip to Venezuela, I had the unique opportunity of exploring educational programs for youth in agriculture in the state of Lara.

In the town of Bojío, for instance, I learned of an instructional program in agriculture at one of the local schools. Their program of study was created to teach high-school aged students, along with high-school graduates interested in agriculture, theories and practices of farming, based on agro-ecology, with the intention of nurturing more local food production and consumption. As explained by the program administrator, Rosa Elena Guédez Domínquez, less than 10% of their local population produces food for the

other 90% and over half of the people in the community have openly expressed that they have no interest in participating in the farm work that is necessary to produce their food. She also stated that it would be impossible for their community to cultivate 100% of the community's produce, for not every crop would survive well in their soil. Nevertheless, the amount of food brought in from other parts of the country and from abroad could absolutely diminish. (Rodríguez)

Ten youth graduated from this program (six women and four men) in 2008 and ten more shall complete the program by the end of 2009. The program's curriculum includes lessons about fieldwork, the chemistry of farming, sustainable methods and organic agricultural practices. One of last year's graduates, Nomar, said he decided to go into farming because he enjoyed working with the environment. He had seen the consequences of pesticide use on humans, in the air and in their water and wanted to learn everything he could to prevent his future children from unnecessary contamination. He wishes that all young people could have the opportunity to work with the land, for "perhaps then they would not drink so much Coca-Cola and watch so much television and would instead have an interest in growing some corn" (Nomar). Although seemingly radical, his call for greater participation on behalf of his peers demonstrates his understanding of the gravity of the situation and the direction in which the majority of young people are headed. (Nomar)

During my time in Venezuela, discussion of youth participation in agriculture was ever-present. We spent much of our time at a small organic farm called *Las Lajitas* that was part of a larger cooperative by the name of *La Alianza* that began in 1979. Like the educational program in Bojón, *Las Lajitas* was started by local leaders and later achieved

government support and funding that would allow them to mature and increase production. Today, they produce and sell 80 tons of produce each week at local markets.

In a discussion with Omar, a farm leader at *Las Lajitas*, we spoke of the farm's search for long term sustainable solutions, and the hope that a younger generation will fill the workers' shoes one day on the farm. He, himself, became involved with agriculture because his family had a small farm in Monte Carmelo, the small town at the foot of *Las Lajitas* that now consists of about 80 families. He said he didn't really have any other opportunities growing up and he wanted to be with his family anyway. However, things are different now. The government has brought proper schooling and teachers to some of the most rural and impoverished neighborhoods of Venezuela. These new schools go two fold the community. On one hand students that would have originally left their communities to study in the cities no longer have to do so and stick around the fields longer to help on the farm, while on the other hand students have greater access to new exciting opportunities that take them away from the homes and communities. Many young people are now attending metropolitan universities and are not returning to the country side more-so than ever before. In retrospect, Chavez's desire to educate conflicts with the *Misión Vuelta al Campo*; not to say that education could not foster interest in agriculture, but rather that the chances of this are slight when considering everything else that the globalized world has to offer these days like technology, media, and international affairs. (Garcia)

Omar understands this contradiction: "Who could blame them [the youth]? City life is easier!" (Garcia). He believes that youth lack consciousness of the past. By learning more history perhaps they would decide to stay in the fields where their

ancestors also worked. His son, for example is not at all interested in agriculture, and although he would have liked to grow old working on the farm with his son, he will be going to Caracas to pursue his interest in carpentry, and “that’s ok”. With this, Omar gestured to his son that was far off by their home and said “I am still his father and I will support him in whatever he wants do” (Garcia). A small number of local youth have joined the cooperative and are working on the farm, but as Omar simply stated “no es suficiente” [this is not enough]. He, along with his co-workers are worried about the future of *Las Lajitas*.

There is a level of complexity associated with the recruitment of youth into sustainable agriculture. Government initiatives in both the United States and Venezuela along with grass-roots programs are working to fill the fields with a new generation of farmers in order to reverse urbanization and to establish local food systems. Yet a paradigm exists between both nations’ excitement and involvement with sustainable agricultural practices, and the reality of how many youth chose to participate in agriculture. In order to secure possibilities of local food production, we must look beyond the programs that exist today, and consider youth participation in agriculture as one of society’s utmost priorities. Societal idealism in both nations has progressed towards materialism and individualistic growth inhibiting voluntary participation on behalf of youth. Until we can assure that cultural idealism will not get in the way of small-scale agricultural development, all programs both in the United States and Venezuela must proliferate their efforts in agricultural development. Today’s youth *are* the future of sustainability. If they do not choose to work in the fields, there is a strong possibility that all small-scale farms will vanish just as they have been for two centuries. Let us not turn

over our health and food systems to industrial production companies, but continue to empower the generation that has the potential of saving small-scale sustainable agriculture practices.

Bibliography

4-H. "Programs and Mission Mandates"

<http://4-h.org/d/Pages/Layouts/GroupPage79d0.html?SiteId=2298&PersistentTheme=4H>

"Agriculture in the Classroom." <<http://www.agclassroom.org/index.htm>>.

"ATTRAnews." Volume 16, November 2008.

Chavez, Hugo & Marta Harnecker. Understanding the Venezuelan Revolution. Monthly Review Press. 2005.

"Ecological Views of Community Building." In Business Sep/Oct 2002.

Farm Service Agency. 2008. <http://content.fsa.usda.gov/fsakids/default.htm>.

Garcia, Omar. Personal Interview. Monte Carmelo. January 2009.

Growing Power, Inc. Growingpower.org. 2008.

"National FFA Organization." 2008. <<http://www.ffa.org/>>.

"National Institute in Sustainable Farming." 2008.

<<http://attra.ncat.org/fundamental.html>>.

Nomar. Personal Interview

Rodríguez, Rosa Elana Guédez. Personal Interview. January 2009.

Pearson, Tamara. "Venezuelan Youth: A Potential Antidote to the Weaknesses of the Revolution." Upside Down World. July 31, 2008.

<<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/3683>>.

Shweitzer, Sarah. "Going Back to the Land: Young People Moving in to Fill Agricultural Niches." Boston Globe May 7, 2005, sec. B1:.

United States Department of Agriculture." 2008.

<<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usdahome>>.

Venezuela and the U.S.: Sustainable Development handout. 2008.

"What are American Ideals and Weaknesses?" The New York Times. November 7, 1915.